

## Chapter 15: Our Gory Days

### Notes:

this chapter is a bit longer than normal surprise but i wanted to fit that end interaction in there so whatever yolo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

### Chapter Text

Hunter knocks on Luz's door, Flapjack happily chirping in his other hand, waiting for a response. He's surprised when he doesn't get one, impulsively deciding to crack the door open after a minute to just check if she's in there. He pokes his head into the room to see Luz sitting on her bed looking down at a book, her head snapping up and the book slamming shut when she sees him. Hunter jumps, immediately apologizing, "Sorry! I'm sorry! I'll go!"

"No, no, sorry, you just scared me," She assures him, "Do you need something?"

"Oh, no, I just wanted to come visit you, if that's ok," He hesitantly requests.

"Uh, ok, yeah," She agrees, although she seems a little reluctant. Hunter goes in anyway, though, figuring she would've said no if she wanted to. He sits down on the bed in front of Luz, Flapjack hopping up and down in his hand.

"Human girl! Human girl! Flapjack human girl!" Flapjack chatters, Hunter laughing.

"Ok, ok, Luz is right here buddy," He assures him, looking up at Luz, "He wants you to hold him, is that ok?"

"Mhm, yeah," Luz holds her hands out, Hunter letting Flapjack hop over into her hand and very happily settle into her hands, Luz bringing him up to her face and greeting him, "Hola, pajarito, ¿cómo estás?"

"I had to use you to bargain with him to let Mr. Clawthorne give him the second replenishing bath. Well, technically I did, but still," Hunter tells her, Luz smiling, although Hunter can't tell how genuine it is. "How are you?" He asks after she doesn't reply, "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, fine," She nods, "You?"

"I'm good," He answers, "I talked to Lilith for a while, a little awkward but she's nice to me now."

"Mmm," Luz hums, the room going very quiet again. Hunter takes Luz in for a minute, noting how her eyes keep on Flapjack, how her eyes are bloodshot and red-rimmed like she had been crying, how she's curving away from him. She doesn't want him in here, he's seen that feeling enough to be able to identify it from body language like this, so Hunter saves her the challenge of telling him.

"I just wanted to check on you, though, I'll leave you be," He assures her, getting up from the bed and holding out his hands, "Come on, Flap, let's go."

"No! No!" Flapjack argues, "Stay!"

"Flapjack, come on," Hunter encourages him, apologizing to Luz, "Sorry, he's being stubborn."

"He can stay, well, if you're ok with it," She offers, "I don't mind having him around."

"Oh, yeah, sure. He really wants to hang out with you so if you're ok keeping him that's ok with me," Hunter replies, smiling, "You can just bring him back to me if he gets annoying."

"He could never be," She looks down at Flapjack and gives him a very small but genuine smile, Hunter walking towards the door.

"I'll see you later, Luz," He calls back to her as he opens the door.

"You too," She replies, Hunter walking out of the room. He goes right next door to his, Gus, and Willow's room, just opening the door and poking his head inside. He doesn't see either of them at first, opening the door more and seeing them against the wall to the right, just sitting on the ground. They both look up when Hunter walks in, although neither of them look happy.

"Hey guys," He greets, "Can I uh, come sit?"

"Yeah, sure," Gus affirms, Hunter walking over and sitting down to the other side of Gus from Willow so he's between them.

"Are you guys doing ok?" Hunter asks, Gus nodding.

"Yeah, we're- we're fine," He quietly answers, Hunter taking in how subdued he looks. It's odd, and although Hunter has no idea what happened after he left the meeting earlier apparently it wasn't good.

"Ok, that's good," He nods even though he doesn't believe it. They just sit in complete silence for a minute, Hunter peeking up when he hears the rustle of plants, sourcing the sound to the grass sprouting from below Willow's feet. Hunter furrows his brow at it, but before he can say anything Willow gets up.

"I'll be right back," She tells them, not waiting for a response before she walks out of the room, shutting the door behind herself. Hunter looks at Gus when he sighs.

"I don't know why she's doing that to herself, I hate it," He complains, Hunter looking at him confused.

"Doing what?"

"Forcing herself to be here for me, and honestly for everyone, when she really needs to be there for herself," Gus moving his knees up to hug to his chest, "You haven't seen it?"

"No?" Hunter replies, still very confused.

"Willow, she- she boxes herself in and feels like she needs to be the reliable friend who is there for everyone and comforting and everything, not being able to help Luz has been killing her. And she comes in here and tries to help me and I appreciate her so much but it's just not helpful. It's so stressful feeling how anxious she is but not being able to do anything about it it's just- I feel so bad for her," Gus scooches a bit closer to Hunter, "I know you haven't known her that long but she's always been like that. It's got something to do with Amity when they were kids, I'm sure, but as long as I've been friends with her she's been the most self-sacrificing, caring person I've ever met. It got better when you came around, which, well, I could guess why that happened."

Hunter looks at Gus confused, unsure of what he means but not asking about it.

"Anyway, I just wish she'd open up about the stuff bothering her, too, not just help other people," Gus finishes, looking up at Hunter, "Sorry, I didn't mean to rant."

"Oh, it's no problem, I'm happy to listen," Hunter assures him, "And, I mean, I don't know her that well-"

"You know her so well, Hunter, it's not even funny," Gus corrects him, Hunter chuckling.

"Ok, I know her a bit well, but regardless I think I see what you mean. It isn't her responsibility, though, I wish she saw that," Hunter agrees.

"Me too," Gus sighs, "I don't know, maybe you can try and talk to her? Everything I've done hasn't worked, maybe you can get her to talk to you about what's been going on. You bring out a very natural side of her, it's impressive."

"Oh, uh, yeah, maybe I do," Hunter shrugs.

"You do it for everyone, Hunter, you're very good at reading people," Gus tells him, "You do it with Luz, too, you're the only person who can talk to her. I don't know how you understand her so well. It's like you two are, I don't know, telepathically connected."

"We aren't," Hunter chuckles, "I don't know, I've never been good at understanding people before, I actually struggled a lot with that for a long time back in the castle, no one ever made any sense. They were all weird and contradictory."

"Maybe you didn't understand them because they weren't your kind of people," Gus proposes, "So now that you have us, it all makes sense!"

Hunter smiles, "Maybe, yeah, maybe that's it."

"But regardless , can you try and talk to Willow at some point? Just try and see if she's doing ok? Please?" Gus requests.

"Yeah, I'll try, I promise," Hunter assures him, Gus scooching a bit closer to Hunter, the room falling silent for a minute. Hunter keeps his eye on Gus, watching his face fall as he rests his head on top of his knees and very quietly admits to Hunter.

"Today at the meeting, after you left, Terra made fun of me. I suggested asking the Collector for help with Belos and she laughed at me, said what I thought was dumb and- I don't know, it's hard to feel useful, Hunter. Do you feel like that?" Gus turns his head to look up at him, "Like nothing we're doing is going to work? Like we're gonna be stuck like this forever? Like- Well, I don't know, this is just specific to me but I miss my dad so much. I-I was never this attached to him before but now I just want to see him again so bad and I feel like we're not getting any close to that goal. I'm just scared, I guess, are you, too?"

Hunter thinks about it for a minute before nodding, deciding on the right answer. "Yeah, I am. I'm sorry about Terra, she's, well, mean. She's been like that my whole life, she's been making fun of me for as long as I can remember, which really isn't that much but the sentiment counts. I know what you mean though, it's scary, not knowing what to do. But we have a lot of capable people around, and we're safe here, and we heard what Eda said, they've had an eye on everyone in town. Your dad is in there too, I'm sure, and if he's anything like you he'll be just fine. But you're allowed to be worried about him, too, it makes sense."

Gus smiles up at Hunter, very weakly answering, "Thanks, Hunter."

Hunter hesitates but decides Gus progressively getting closer is probably an indication this is what he wants, wrapping an arm around Gus, who curls right into his side. Hunter smiles at the smaller boy next to him, happy that he's able to bring Gus some comfort. Gus has been down recently, Hunter can tell, and he's starting to understand the full picture of why. There's probably some stuff that Hunter isn't picking up on, but he's learning bit by bit. Gus will tell him whenever he's ready.

Willow comes back in after a minute, walking into the room and not saying anything, just sitting down on the other side of Hunter. She clearly doesn't want to talk, so Hunter doesn't push it. He knows he's doing what he can just being here, and he'll talk to her at some point, just not now.

It's been a stressful day, that conversation can wait.

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Luz looks down at the little bird in her hands, hearing Hunter go into the room next door. She smiles a bit at Flapjack, telling him, "I'm surprised you'd rather be with me than Hunter, I'm not really any fun to be around."

Flapjack tweets at her, something she can't decipher yet understands completely in the cheerful tone and the way he jumps.

"I'm really not enjoyable, though, I've been, I don't know, a mopey, self-deprecating mess recently," She admits to him, "And I appreciate everyone trying to help but sometimes I don't want help, I just want to- I don't know, wallow in it. It's not good for me either but it's so frustrating because every time I try to figure out what's wrong with me it just gets, I don't know, so much bigger."

Flapjack is staring up at her attentively, giving Luz enough of an indication to continue.

"I was talking to my mom earlier and what started out as me trying to make her understand how everything that has happened here is my fault somehow ended up with me talking about my dad. I didn't even know he was a part of this mess going on in my head and then boom, now I'm thinking about him too," She rambles, stopping for a moment and asking, "You don't know about him, do you, little guy?"

Flapjack shakes his head, timidly tweeting what Luz interprets as a hesitant request to tell him.

"It's good for me to talk about, the school psychiatrist used to tell me that all the time. Well, that's a bad point, I hate that guy," She dryly laughs, "But, well, I can tell you, you're trustworthy, right?"

Flapjack twitters happily and hops up and down. Luz chuckles at him.

"The story isn't nice, no need to get excited," She halfheartedly jokes, "My dad died when I was a kid, he was sick when I was younger, he's the reason I moved to Gravesfield in Connecticut to go to a better treatment place. I loved him a lot, it was hard not having him around anymore, things just didn't feel right."

Flapjack chirps in a way Luz just feels is understanding. She's not sure why, she certainly can't hear him, but the way he sounded felt like he knew what she was talking about, like he's felt it before.

"Yeah, do you know what I mean, Flapjack? Has something like that happened to you?" She asks, Flapjack sadly tweeting something indecipherable and nodding. Luz scratches him on the head, sighing, "I'm sorry, I know it's hard to think about, I feel the same way."

Flapjack leans up into her hand, Luz petting him a moment before continuing to talk.

"And- I don't know, every time I talk about it everyone gets all sad and pitying, everyone except for my mom, but even then she doesn't understand what I feel like. She just- She can't accept that I just want her to listen. Not help or try to fix it or justify it, I don't care about

any of that. I just want to sit and tell someone everything without them telling me I'm wrong," She rants, "I know myself, I know what I've done, why does no one get that?"

Flapjack timidly twitters, Luz unable to figure out what it meant.

"I don't know, every time I try to bring it up I just dig myself deeper, but when I don't talk about it no one wants to be around me. Even my girlfriend barely tolerates hanging out with me sometimes, and I don't even blame her. I just wish I knew what to do to get better," She pauses for a minute, the realization hitting her like a truck as she mumbles out, "Maybe I never will get any better."

Flapjack shakes his head, Luz scratching him on the head.

"I know I shouldn't think like that, but I've been in a rut that's just been getting deeper and deeper for five years, who's to say I'm getting out of it now?" She counters.

Flapjack demandingly chirps, jumping up and down in her hand. Luz looks at him confused.

"What, buddy? What's up?" She puzzles, Flapjack nodding up towards her. It takes her a minute, but eventually she picks up on what he wants, bringing her hands closer to her face so Flapjack can nuzzle against her cheek, making Luz laugh. "Thank you Flap, thank you for the cuddles," She coos. Flapjack just cuddles even closer, happily chirping at her. She lets him do it a bit more before pulling him away from her face so she can look at him, giving him a small smile and telling him, "Hunter is lucky to have you, little guy, you're a very good listener."

She scratches him on the head, Flapjack leaning into it. When she stops, Flapjack looks back and forth like he's looking for something, Luz reaching over and going into the bag next to her, hanging off of the chest next to her bed, and pulling out her palisman egg.

"Is this what you're looking for?" She asks, setting the egg down in her lap and putting Flapjack down on her leg so he can look at it. He nuzzles against it, Luz sighing, "I don't know, Flap, it hasn't even cracked. I think the closest thing I'm going to get to a palisman is you and Owlbert, and he's been so busy hovering around Eda that I've barely seen him. I guess if it did hatch I'd just mess up its life, too, right?"

Flapjack scrunches up his face disgruntledly and tweets at her, butting his head into the egg and twittering.

"Is something in there? Can you like, I don't know, feel something?" She questions, Flapjack just looking at her, not nodding or shaking his head. "Mmm, I figured, that was a stupid question."

Flapjack hops down into her lap, the gap within her crossed legs, settling down next to the egg. She reaches down and scratches his head, hoping maybe she interpreted Flapjack wrong and he can hear something from in the egg or feel something in there. As much as she fears that she messed up its life, she really wants to believe she didn't.

She just lets Flapjack settle into her lap, reaching over and grabbing the Azura book on the chest next to her bed and setting it in front of her, closed. Flapjack doesn't get up but twitters, Luz telling him, "I've been reading this book a lot, the first one, I don't know, it means a lot to me."

She opens up the cover, her eyes immediately catching the handwriting covering the inside of the front cover and the first page, going to ignore it but Flapjack takes an interest, getting up and hopping over to it. He looks up at her, Luz sighing.

"My dad gave me this book," She tells him, "It's a note from him. Before he, you know, died."

Flapjack tweets questioningly at her, although a bit timid.

"Do you want me to read it to you?" She asks, Flapjack nodding. Luz contemplates it, really not sure if she's up to reading it again. Looking at the note makes her feel sick, but for Flapjack, she'll stomach reading it again. She takes a deep breath before telling him, "I'll read it, ok? I'll do my best."

Flapjack headbutts her knee encouragingly, Luz weakly smiling before beginning to read the note in her dad's very shaky handwriting.

"Mija,

"A long time ago I had a student in a drawing class make me a portrait of the good witch Azura, returning from one of her great adventures, tired and bruised but victorious and smiling, eagerly awaiting her next journey. The good witch Azura valiantly fights for peace wherever she goes, she befriends every person she meets, she beats every enemy that comes upon her, and she especially reminds me of a very special girl I know. And ever since I picked up this book I've wanted to read it to you. And I've been waiting, and waiting, and waiting for the right time, but I know now that I won't get the chance. It's sad, of course, but I don't want you to read this book and think about how sad you are. I want you to read this book and enjoy it, connect to the characters, and surround yourself with all of the magic that is this series. You always grew up loving magic and I know you probably won't be like that forever but hey, your papá can hope you'll be little forever.

"But no matter what you do, or what you love, or what you go on to do in life, know that I will love you no matter what. I want you to go, be nerdy, be weird and embarrassing, and do whatever makes you happy even if Mamá tells you that you need to focus on school. Everything you do, no matter how out there, use me as your excuse, tell your teachers and Mamá and your principal that your amazing dad told you it was ok to want to be a witch or a hero instead of a doctor or study magic instead of history or learn witch tongue instead of Geometry," Luz has to pause and take a deep breath for a second, wiping tears off of her face before shakily continuing.

"I know by the time you're reading this I'm gone, and I know it's going to be really hard getting used to things with just you and Mom. Always remember she's there for you to talk to, and always remember it's ok to cry. I don't want you to pretend things are alright, let yourself mourn and adjust. And, at the end of the day, remember that I love you more than

anything in this world, and that I would give anything to get to see you grow up here, but even though I can't, I'm watching over you always. And finally, I'll leave you with your favorite story.

"Twas once the most beautiful and strong witch to have ever roamed the land. She spread her magic, her love, and her kindness to everyone she met. Her journeys were long, she met many friends, but at the end of the day she came back home and settled into her bed, and her dad came and tucked her in, and she whined and complained that she was too old for that but he did it anyway. And he gave her a kiss and told her how good she had done, how bravely she had fought, and how she was victorious no matter how hard it was. Then he left her to get her rest and promised her to be here in the morning, even if she couldn't see him.

"Never lose your magic, mi niña,

"Te amo por siempre, Papá."

By the end of the letter, Luz is pretty much sobbing, Flapjack tweeting at her over and over and rubbing against her leg, Luz reaching down and picking him up so she can hold him to her chest, petting him as she catches her breath for a second. Feeling the warmth of the bird against her grounds her, and as hard as it was to read those final words from her dad again she knows she did it. She had forgotten how encouraging he was of all of the crazy stuff she did, that she has been doing. Even though he didn't know any of this was real, he wanted her to do it anyway, but it just makes her chest hurt more wishing he was here to see all of it too. She needed that, and she doesn't know if Flapjack somehow knew she needed it but regardless he helped a lot, even if he was just nosy.

"Thank you, Flapjack," She tells him, holding him up to look at her, sniffing, "I needed that, thank you."

He happily chirps back, Luz wiping her face and looking down at the book in front of her, setting Flapjack down on her leg and flipping to the back of it.

"Here, I have pictures of him, I can show you," She tells him, taking them out of the small pocket glued onto the back page of her book. It's a small stack of photos of Luz and her dad, Luz laying them all out for Flapjack. One is a photo strip from a photo booth when she was really young, maybe 3 or 4, before he got sick. Another is from her first day of kindergarten, and another Christmas from sometime before they moved to Gravesfield, another from right after they moved when the two of them were gardening in the front of the house, covered in dirt because neither had any kind of green thumb, and one of her sitting in his lap, far too old to do that, him reading something to her. The last one she pulls out, though, is one from her birthday the year he died. He looks sick, exhausted, frail, but he's sitting next to her smiling from ear to ear, with a cake with a number 10 on top sitting in front of them. She holds it up for Flapjack, "This one my mom didn't want me to take for my book, she used to tell me that I shouldn't remember him like this. But, I mean, I do, this is what he looked like for a couple of years before he died, I'd rather have the happy memory to look at than the sad one to think about, right Flap?"



Flapjack turns around and nods at her, turning back and hopping over to the picture of them gardening. Luz chuckles, setting down the one she had and picking it up.

“Mi papá and I were so bad at gardening, but we tried our best to grow stuff out in front of the house. We grew a watermelon once, actually, we thought it was going to be a pumpkin but the watermelon was a nice surprise. We carved it instead of a pumpkin for Halloween that year, and it was both much tastier and much more fun growing it ourselves,” She tells him, the moment of silence making her frown at all of the photos of days she’d give anything to relive, before stacking them up. She tucks them back into the pocket, Flapjack hopping up and poking at the book.

He looks back at her and twitters almost questioningly, Luz trying to think about what he’s saying before putting the pieces together.

“Do you want to read the book with me?” She offers, Flapjack nodding, settling on top of where her legs cross. She opens to her favorite part of this book, Azura’s first time meeting Hecate in the Duel of Fates at Polys’ Cavern, looking down at the bird in her lap for a second and really thinking about what she’s doing right now. Reading, to a bird, who can talk to her. In a moment of lucidity, it seems so outlandish to think about, but really she doesn’t want anything else right now than to bask in that magic, just like her dad told her to. So, she just looks back at the book and starts reading.

“Azura stands at the edge of the sheer cliff...”

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Eda watches as Raine chops up ingredients next to her, Eda stirring the pot of boiling water with a couple of other ingredients that they’re currently making dinner with. They’ve been cooking in complete silence, although they did start kind of late. It’s already 6 and they’re not anywhere near having dinner finished, but they both figured no one has much of an appetite anyway. They’re doing what they can, and that’s not a lot right now.

Eda’s trance is broken when she hears someone coming down the hallway, looking over to see Hunter poking his head into the room, Eda smiling and greeting him, “Hey kid.”

“Hey,” He greets, fully stepping into the room, “Are you uh, making dinner?”

“Yeah, but we got a bit of a late start, if you’re hungry and want something to eat you can grab a snack,” She offers.

“Oh, it’s ok, I was just asking,” He replies, stepping a bit closer, “What are you making?”

"Soup and skog meat, we're running out of dishes Luz can eat," Eda tells him, pausing a second before realizing this is the perfect opportunity to talk to him. "Oh, yeah, kid, I have something to ask you."

"What is it?" He asks, eyes wide. She just smiles at him.

"Don't stress, it's nothing bad," She assures him, "Raine and I were just thinking about what happened last night and the night before, and we were both wondering if you'd be more comfortable sleeping in our room? We could move your bed in there and everything, but you don't have to do it. It's just a suggestion."

Hunter's eyes light up ever so slightly, giving her a clearly intentionally subdued small smile and enthusiastically replying, "That works! Yeah, I like that, we can do that instead."

"Alright, sounds like a deal," She smiles at him, looking over when Raine nudges her a bit, putting down the knife they were cutting with. She looks at them attentively, Raine nodding towards the door, Eda smiling at them and nodding, Raine returning the smile and walking out of the room, giving Hunter a small smile as they walk by, going out into the hallway. Hunter barely misses a beat, looking back at Eda and asking.

"What's wrong with Raine?" He asks, Eda being caught a bit off guard.

"Nothing, they're fine," She answers, confused, "What do you mean something is wrong? What seems wrong?"

"Well, they didn't say anything when I came in, and they didn't say anything to you, and I haven't seen them today at all and they normally don't look that tense and stuff," Hunter rattles off, Eda very impressed that he read them like a book.

"You're attentive, kid," She chuckles, "Well, if you're worried about it you should just ask them, I'm not in a place to talk to you about it."

"Now I know something is wrong," Hunter replies hesitantly, Eda just sighing, knowing she isn't going to convince him otherwise. Raine comes back into the room a minute later, walking back up to the counter and continuing to cut up vegetables. Hunter walks up behind Eda and next to Raine, quietly asking them, "Raine?"

"Hm?" They look back at him.

"Are you ok?" Hunter asks, "Is everything ok? I'm sorry if that's inappropriate, but you just seem quiet."

"Oh, yeah, I'm ok, thank you for asking. I just have a headache and everything is, you know, a lot. I've just been overstimulated, things are just loud today, you know?" Raine explains, "It just happens to me sometimes, and it's ok to ask about it, not inappropriate at all."

"Oh, sometimes I feel like that but with like touching things, so I understand," Hunter nods, "Ok, good, I'm glad you're ok."

"Are you ok, too, kiddo?" Raine asks, Hunter humming.

"Mhm, yeah, I'm ok," He affirms, "I feel ok."

"Good," Raine smiles, looking back to continue what they were doing. Hunter just idles there, clearly not wanting to go back to his friends or whatever he was doing earlier.

Eda looks back at him, offering, "Do you want to help cook?"

"Oh, yeah, sure!" He nods, "Can I go get Flapjack first? He's with Luz."

"He's with Luz? Why?" Eda questions.

Hunter shrugs, "He wanted to go with her, I just left him in there. He was mad when I tried to take him and leave."

Eda laughs, "You and that bird, kid, that's something special. Go ahead, no rush."

Hunter smiles and walks away, going up the stairs. Eda looks at Raine.

"Why did you tell him all of that?" She puzzles, "I feel like he shouldn't know all of that, you know, he's a kid."

"Exactly why he should. I'm setting an example that it's ok to not be ok," Raine explains, "You heard what he said, he didn't care at all and actually understood what I was talking about and feeling, and now he knows that's ok to talk about. He's like a blank slate, Eda, he's had no positive influences ever, if you hide things from him he's going to think that's ok, but if you're honest and open he'll understand he can be too."

"I mean, I guess if it works for you, don't expect me to do that."

"You should be, Eda," Raine presses.

She sighs, "I just don't want him to have to stress about all of that, I care about him, he has enough on his plate."

"And I care about him too, we're on the same page there," They reply, "His favorite thing to say to me is that things he feels and thinks are weird, I don't want him to believe that, I'll easily tell him about me if it makes him feel more normal. Besides, he knew, it's not worth hiding it for him to just sit and worry about it anyway."

"He shouldn't feel responsible, though."

"I don't think he does," They shake their head, "He was fine when I told him that just now, brushed right over it like it was nothing. You need to remember this kid was told nothing true his whole life, a little honesty goes a long way."

She chuckles, looking at Raine and smiling, "I raised a kid for 8 years and you're still better at this than me, Rainestorm, go figure."

"Hey, I'm just doing my best," They answer, both of them looking over when someone comes down the stairs. Eda sees Hunter walk back into the room, no Flapjack in his hands.

"No Flapjack?" Eda asks, Hunter shaking his head.

"No, Luz was taking a nap with him when I went in there, I didn't have the heart to take him," Hunter replies, "He also told me no, so I wasn't getting him if I wanted to."

Eda laughs, "Well if you've got two free hands, do you mind taking over stirring for a minute? My arm needs a rest."

"Yeah, sure," He nods, Eda stepping out of the way and letting him stir the pot, Eda flexing her hand and letting her arm relax. This arm doesn't normally get this much action, so it's definitely been sore today.

"I was talking to your parents earlier, and Liltih too," Hunter tells Eda, breaking the momentary silence.

"Yeah, I saw, my whole family loves you now, whether that's a good or a bad thing you'll have to figure out," She jokes, Hunter chuckling.

"I like them, though, they're nice. Lilith was telling me about palismen history, like how-"

"Hey kiddo," Raine cuts in, Eda able to tell they're not super overstimulated but definitely not too keen to listen right now, although she's worried about how Hunter is going to react to that. They very calmly and casually tell Hunter, "I really want to hear about this, I told you before I find it really interesting, but I just need it to be quiet right now, ok? Maybe we can talk tomorrow about it instead, does that sound ok?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry," He timidly apologizes, Raine warmly smiling at him.

"No need to be sorry, thank you for understanding" Raine assures him, "I'm not mad at you or anything, you couldn't have known. And I do want to know about it and will be asking you tomorrow, so don't think you're getting out of telling me."

Hunter brightens right back up, laughing, "Ok, yeah, I'm excited to tell you."

Raine doesn't say anything, just reaching up and ruffling his hair, Eda beaming looking at the two of them. She's so impressed with them it isn't even funny, the way they were able to so calmly and directly tell Hunter to be quiet yet get him to understand that they want to listen to him was very well done, and Hunter doesn't appear at all bothered by it. It's almost unfair how natural Raine is at it, and Eda is starting to doubt she was raising King right at all. It stings a little bit, but maybe this is her second chance. Well, third if you could Luz, but she doesn't want to think about that right now. Instead, she just watches them cook in silence,

leaning against the wall and enjoying the positive feeling in the room that's been scarce today.

If anything good came out of today, she and Raine helped make Hunter more comfortable, and that's an achievement she's proud of.

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Eda walks back into the living room, holding a mug of a tea and apple blood mix that Raine likes. She already has her cup in here on the coffee table, just pure apple blood, and she contemplated not making Raine tea because of their history with it, but she figured as long as the cup is open and the liquid is dark it should be ok. She sets it down in front of them, Raine looking up from where they're twiddling with their hands and smiling.

"Tea?" They ask, Eda smiling.

"Tea and apple blood, an Eda special made with my own bare hand," She jokes, Raine taking it from her and returning the smile.

"Thank you," They reply, Eda pretending not to pay attention as they quietly whistle into it. She just sits and grabs her own cup, leaning back to see them sipping on theirs very slowly.

"Hunter is all set up in our room upstairs, his bed is moved and everything. I told him we'd be up in half an hour or so, he didn't look like he was too excited to sleep without us in there so we can't take too long," Eda tells them, Raine nodding. "Are you feeling better?"

"Mhm, yeah, this will help, too, thank you," They hold up the cup a bit to indicate to it, "You know me well, Calamity."

Eda looks down into her cup as she blushes, although the nice moment is cut into by Darius yelling down the hallway, "Hey! Eda! Raine!"

Eda and Raine look at each other with mutual annoyance before Eda calls back, careful not to scream too loud, "In here."

Darius walks down the hallway and stands in the doorway of the living room, saying to the two of them, "Your parents, Eberwolf, Lilith, and Camila all want to talk about a plan, without the kids and everything. I don't think any of us are getting much sleep without something like that. Are you guys coming?"

Eda looks at Raine, who shrugs indifferently, Eda looking back and nodding, "Sure, but I promised Hunter we'd be up within a half hour because he won't sleep alone in our room, so it can't be that long."

"Eh, bring him, he'll be helpful," Darius tells her, Eda looking at him confused.

"What do you mean bring him? He's like 16, he doesn't want to be talking about this," She counters, Darius scoffing.

"This is probably the best meeting he'll ever have been to, and we could use his help," Darius reasons, "I'll go ask him, he's in your room?"

"Mhm, yeah, don't press him into it," She warns him, Darius walking down the hallway and calling back.

"Won't need to!"

Eda just looks at Raine, the two of them laughing as they take another sip from their mug. Eda takes a drink from hers, the two of them sitting in silence for a minute before Darius comes back down the stairs, standing back in the doorway with Hunter, who is smiling in his slightly baggy pajamas he stole from Raine, clearly not annoyed to be down here at all. Eda still jokes with him, "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"I don't have a bedtime," He furrows his brow at her, "And I want to help."

"I'm not telling you that you can't, come on, let's go," Eda gets up, Raine following after her. They all walk towards the basement, Darius spitting off from them to go towards the tower, telling them.

"The basement is set up with a table that fits us, well, drag another chair over for Hunter," Darius says, All of them nodding and heading downstairs, where there's now a small, circle table in the middle of the room instead of the long one for everyone. Lilith is already sitting, leaving two seats between her and Camila. Next to Camila are Eda's parents, then Eberwolf, and then two free chairs. Eda walks over to the corner of the room where the chairs are stacked and grabs another one, returning to the table and gesturing to the chair already there for Hunter to sit in, Raine already sitting next to Camila.

"Sit, kid, this is for me," Eda encourages, Hunter sitting down and moving the chair over so Eda can put her chair in the gap between him and Lilith. Everyone at the table is pretty quiet, Eda looking back when she hears Darius coming down the hallway.

"Alador, no, you can't work on the hand, come on, give me 20 minutes," He pleads, Alador groaning.

"Fine, whatever," He agrees, the two of them coming down the stairs, Alador covered in patches of abomination goop. They both sit down on the other side of the table, Alador next to Lilith and Darius next to Eda's dad. They all sit quietly for a second before Camila breaks the silence.

"Darius, can I apologize for what Luz was saying to you earlier? I talked to her, I'm sorry she was so standoffish, it wasn't respectful and we talked for a while about it," Camila tells her, Darius just smiling and waving her off.

"Don't even worry about it, that's probably the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me at a meeting," He assures her, "You should've heard the stuff Hunter said to me when he was little."

Hunter groans, "I was 8 Darius, I know what you're talking about."

Darius laughs, telling everyone, "He liked to parrot what Terra used to say to me, and coven head meetings were not civil in the slightest." Everyone at the table laughs, letting the positive moment settle for a second before Darius starts speaking again. "Alright, I don't think any of us are sleeping without some kind of idea of what we're going to do about Belos so we need to get talking about it. I don't care what we start with but we need to start spitballing something," He tells everyone, "Does anyone have anything helpful for us right now?"

"I've been trying to read up on palismen consumption but there's not a ton of research on it," Eda's dad replies, "I'll look through what other books we have here to see if there's anything else on it, but for now I know scarily little about it."

"Fantastic, what we want to hear," Darius sighs, "We can't do anything about him if we don't know what he is, can we?"

"No, we really can't," He shakes his head, "We have no idea if he can stay like that or not."

"I don't think he can," Hunter chimes in, "I'm pretty sure he needs a body, something to support him structurally, but I don't know how long it'll last. I think that palismen extend the life of his body, though, he ate them constantly before the Day of Unity. And that would make sense as to why he's doing it now because if he's not able to move around obviously the Collector is going to catch him."

"Do you think the Collector is going to go after him?" Darius asks, "I mean, he doesn't seem to be now."

Hunter nods, "He was furious at him in the head on the Day of Unity, he literally exploded him. I don't think he's forgotten that."

"I feel like we need to get an idea of who the Collector is and what he wants," Eda adds, "We know so scarily little about him."

"Sorry, the kids explained this to me but I still feel like I'm behind," Camila apologizes, "Why can't we just talk to him? Isn't he just a child?"

"He's a very strong child, and also probably thousands of years old," Eda answers.

Darius nods, "He's not just a normal 8-year-old, he's one of the most powerful beings in this realm, if not the most. He's got the power of the stars on his side and all we have is a few children, some ex-coven heads, and a one-handed harpy woman."

“Hey, I’m not always one-handed,” Eda argues.

“That doesn’t matter, what matters is that we’re at such a disadvantage,” Darius states, “Do we really think that the Collector is the only solution?”

Everyone looks around at one another uncertainly, although Hunter nods, and when everyone looks at him he explains, “Luz put a sigil on Belos’ wrist and what rendered all of us completely limp made him turn into the thing that you saw. We fought him and no matter what we did we didn’t even make a dent. The Collector stepped in and immediately flicked him against the wall and splattered him everywhere without even flinching. If we want a sure way to make sure he’s not coming back we need the Collector to step in and help us, but first I think we need to observe him more.”

“We’re not seeing them, though,” Darius counters.

“We’re not looking in the right places, he’s somewhere,” Hunter states, “He hasn’t just vanished, tales of the Collectors say that they’re powerful but corporeal, he’s somewhere.”

“But where ? The Isles are huge, and he might not even be on the Isles,” Darius points out.

“He’s probably still here, he has his game here, and he’s not going to abandon it,” Hunter reasons, “That’s where we need to start, remote reconnaissance. Track traces of them, patterns, areas that seem like they’re changing even if it’s not a lot. If we really need you can set up passive traps for them to trip but they’re otherworldly so that might not work. But put less focus on here on the right arm, move towards the Latissa area, if he’s planning on moving he’s not going to go for the small palmar settlements with only a handful of people, that isn’t fun for him if he’s looking for playtime.”

“Titan, kid, you’re good at this,” Eda nudges him, seeing him smile.

He shrugs, “I’ve been doing it my whole life. It’s like a puzzle, it’s not hard.”

“Well, I like it, I say we listen to him,” Eda states, everyone around the table nodding.

“I’d love to analyze some movements if we get any,” Liliith volunteers, “I’ll keep watch on some areas too if we need it. I don’t mind having a crystal ball on while I work.”

“I can also help if you need,” Eda’s mom adds, “I don’t do much, and if it helps I’m glad to do it.”

“We’ll set that up with Osran tomorrow,” Darius says, “It’s a good start, definitely, the more eyes the better.”

“And if we get any sight of Belos try to grab a good photo for me to look at,” Eda’s dad requests, “I can’t do much not being able to see him, but maybe something can come from a visual that I can’t get from scarce research.”



Eberwolf chatters something to Darius, who hums and nods, Hunter also nodding. Eda shouldn't be surprised, of course he can understand Eberwolf too, he worked with him.

"That's a good point, Eber," Darius nods, not telling anyone. Camila looks around at the table, probably trying to figure out if any of them understand, Eda stepping up and jokingly snippily asking.

"Well, are you gonna translate or is his point lost on us?"

"Direwolf is a very popular language, put some effort into learning it, Owl Lady," Darius clips back, "But he just said that the Collector probably remembers some of us. He definitely knows Hunter."

"Yes, I can confirm they knows me," Hunter nods, "They probably know all of the major people who have worked in the castle, ex or not. They've been around for Belos' entire existence as Belos, they're definitely familiar with us."

"And our best friend the Owl Beast," Eda remarks, looking at Lilith, "I know they're old friends."

"This is not looking great," Darius sighs, "Do they not have a history with anyone?"

"Luz, Willow, Amity, and Gus," Hunter answers.

"Me," Alador chimes in, although he doesn't look up from where he's fiddling with something in his lap. Darius looks over at him questioningly, leaning in and looking into his lap.

"Alador! You agreed not to work," Darius holds his hand out to his boyfriend, who annoyedly sighs, putting the golden piece of metal and some abomination goop into Darius' hand.

"Sorry," He disingenuously replies, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms, looking at Darius and frowning. Darius just smiles at him and shakes his head as he puts what he was tinkering with on the table, Alador cracking a smile.

"Ok, well, anyway, we'll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it, I think," Darius tells everyone.

"I agree," Eda's dad nods, "If we try to talk about it all at once it'll just make it harder, let's work one thing at a time. Monitoring, note-taking, and researching are the three things we're able to do right now, that's all we should be worrying ourselves about." Everyone hums in affirmation, Eda's dad yawning before telling everyone, "Alright, well, with that being said, it's getting late and it's been a long day, I think I'm going up to bed," He looks over at his wife, who nods.

"Me too, thank you guys for chatting, it feels a lot better having somewhat of an idea of what we're going to do," She adds, both of them standing up and bidding their goodbyes to the group. As they do, Darius and Alador start going back and forth about something, the two of them clearly teasing one another. Once Eda's parents are out of earshot, Lilith groans.

"You two are disgusting," She says, "Have you ever changed?"

"Not like you have," Darius quips back, "I didn't even know you were here until a week after we got here because you had been locked up in your room, nothing has changed, Lilith."

"What do you mean you didn't know I was here? I live here," She playfully argues.

"It's a little hard to remember who is at the Owl House with all of the people Eda has had here," Darius says, raising his eyebrow at Eda, who laughs.

"Hey, I haven't had someone over here in 8 years, there was no one new here after I got King, I'm a responsible parent and King was also mean to every partner I had," She denies, "And it isn't even that many people, and also how do you know that?"

"Hooty," Darius answers, leaning back, "He blabbed to all of the coven scouts one time they came to capture you, told them about how you had someone over and you have a lot of people over and you weren't able to answer the door because you were busy upstairs."

All of the adults at the table laugh, Eda shaking her head, "I'm going to mutilate that bird tube, airing my life out like that."

"The fascinating part to me is that you slept in a nest," Darius says.

"I didn't sleep into a nest until like a year before I got King, why do you think I had the mattress for my bed lying around?" Eda points out, "And for your information, I had a partner who liked the nest."

"What?" Darius gawks at her, even Alador perking up at the comment. "That's appalling, never say that to me again."

"You brought it up," She leans against the table, laughing, "Don't ask if you don't want to know."

"That's gross, Edalyn," Darius comments.

"If it was so gross, why was that one of my longest-lasting relationships?" She challenges him.

"How long is long?" Darius questions, "Didn't none of your relationships last long?"

She looks over when she sees Raine shift in their seat, surprised to see them looking almost angry, the realization immediately hitting Eda that she's making them jealous. It's not right, but her insecurity seizes the opportunity to test if Raine really cares about her like that anymore, replying to Darius, "Hey, my longest relationship after school was 6 months, that's a long time!"

"Ok, well what was the next longest?"

“Ok, well, a month and a half,” She concedes, chuckling, “The ‘bad mysterious criminal’ appeal wears off after about a month, then I become bad and mysterious and a criminal, then they generally run for the hills.” Everyone around the table laughs, although Raine just takes another large sip of their cup, Eda deciding to poke back at Darius, “You’re one to talk about relationships, how many have you been in since school?”

“I’m in one right now,” He points out.

“This doesn’t count,” She waves him off, “Other than this, tell me, Mr. Professional.”

She takes a sip of her cup as she watches him struggle for an answer, just shaking his head and going, “Only one, but that doesn’t matter, I’m a busy person! I’m not the only one who has been with no one since school, songbird .”

Darius eyes Raine, who almost chokes on their drink, putting it down and asking, “What?”

“How many people have you dated since school?”

Raine grumbles, stalling a second before muttering, “None.”

“Oh, what, hung up on someone?” Darius teases, Raine shaking their head.

“What? Why is that important? Were you hung up on someone?” They direct the conversation back at him.

“Not anymore,” Darius slyly smiles, nudging Alador next to him, who looks up at him trying to look annoyed although he’s smiling.

“Do you guys realize Hunter is right here?” Raine reminds them, Darius just waving his hand at them.

“Eh, he’s heard worse, and he probably doesn’t even know what we’re talking about right now,” Darius reasons, Hunter shaking his head, looking between Eda and Raine.

“I have no idea,” He tells them, everyone laughing, Eda rubbing his shoulder.

“As long as you’re having fun, kid,” She says, Hunter very contently smiling back at her, clearly enjoying this conversation even in his confusion. She’s sure he just likes being surrounded by people who are happy, so even if this conversation is a little much for him, he’s old enough and he’s enjoying the quality time.

“Totally separate from him you guys are crazy, I don’t get how you’re all so obsessed with this stuff,” Liliith cuts in.

“Alright Lily, I can think of one reason why you don’t get it,” Eda teases her, Liliith chuckling.

“Ok, but still, how do you even find so many people?”

"The Emperor's Coven," Eda flatly reminds her.

Lilith groans, "Titan, the number of scouts we lost to you was unhealthy."

"Hey, what can I say? I have a talent for converting people against the Emperor, they just love me so much they have to rebel," She jokes, not missing how Raine eyes her as everyone else laughs. Their face is so twisted with jealousy and it makes Eda almost excited, because no one who doesn't care about someone is jealous of their dating history. She knows she shouldn't but she also knows her insecurity needs this today.

"And then I have to fire them, such a hassle," Lilith complains, "And so many of them too!"

"There is nothing wrong with that," Eda dismisses her, "Just because you all aren't cool like me doesn't mean you need to dunk on it."

"Cool is definitely a descriptive word," Darius jokes, everyone laughing.

"Cool is my word. I'm the most wanted and the most wanted witch on the Boiling Isles, if you know what I mean." Her joke cracks everyone up, Hunter looking at her confused. She just smiles and tells him, "I'm wanted by the law and by partners, that's the joke."

"Ohh," He hums, laughing.

"And besides," Eda addresses the table again, "They all make good stories."

Camila laughs, chiming in, "I understand that, I was the same as you in school."

"Really?" Eda looks over at her in shock, "You don't strike me as that kind of person?"

"Most people say that, yeah," She nods, "I dated a lot in high school, I don't know, just looking for what fit. Everyone too, men, women, in between, it never mattered to me. I never put a label on it, though."

"A label?" Darius questions, "Why would you label who you've been with?"

"It's a human thing," Eda tells him, "Luz told me about it."

"It is?" Camila questions, "You guys don't have any kinds of sexuality labels here?"

"Nope," Eda shakes her head, "To us, who you like is none of anyone else's business."

"I like that mentality," She smiles, "The Human Realm is all about needing to identify yourself and know what you want and all of that, it was always too much work for me. I've always been a proponent of just dating whoever you want, finding what works."

"See, someone gets it," Eda says, looking at Camila, "Although, I don't know how long 'high school' lasts,"

“Not long, 4 years,” Camila replies, “I didn’t date a ton of people, I had settled down with Manny by the time I was 21, and had Luz when I was 23.”

“23?” Alador questions, Eda surprised he was paying any attention.

“Yeah, I mean, a bit young, we didn’t mean to have her that young,” Camila answers, “But it’s not super uncommon, a lot of people have kids much younger than that.”

“Our cultures must be much different, I had Edric and Emira at 30 and even then people told me I was too young,” He replies.

“Also, hold on, Luz was an accident?” Eda questions, Camila nodding.

“Mhm, she was an accident. I was still in school at the time, we weren’t ready for a kid but we wanted one, so we just decided to keep her,” Camila shrugs, Eda bursting out laughing.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry, it’s not that funny,” She waves her hand in front of her.

“Alright, Edalyn, you were barely planned,” Lilith teases her.

“Hey hey hey, I was not an accident,” Eda counters, turning to the table and justifying herself, “My parents had two kids because my dad didn’t like the ‘lyn’ naming that the Clawthorne family did so he named one kid and my mom named the other after her Clawthrone legacy. I was not an accident.”

Alador looks at Darius, “You were.”

He groans, “I was not .”

Alador laughs, “Yeah, you were, your brother told me the first time I met him.”

Eda laughs, pointing at Darius, “Hah! You were an accident!”

“Oh my Titan, Alador, what have you subjected me to?” Darius complains.

“Haha! Darius was an accident,” Eda teases, looking over when Hunter next to her laughs too.

“Hunter,” Darius playfully threatens, “You can’t say anything or I will tell this table my favorite kid Hunter stories and you don’t want that.”

“Now you gotta tell us one,” Eda says.

“Darius,” Hunter whines, “Come on, I was a child!”

“But you were a funny one,” Darius counters, “Hmm, oh, when Hunter was younger all of the coven heads had designated ‘school time’ with him to, I don’t know, train him or something?”

But I went to get him for my lesson and I walked in and Eberwolf had him dressed up like a direwolf, facepaint and all. I chased him around for 20 minutes as he hid and then jumped out and beat me with a club, poorly impersonating the language at me. He was furious that I was trying to make him put a shirt on."

Everyone around the table laughs, although Hunter just groans, "I was like 4! This isn't fair!"

"What's even more unfair is I'm pretty sure I have a picture," Darius summons his scroll, Hunter covering his face with his hands.

"Darius!" Hunter whines as Darius laughs.

"Don't whine at me, you're the one who insisted on it," Darius counters, impersonating baby Hunter and saying, "'Darius, Darius I want you to take a picture, Darius I want you to show me a picture of my outfit!'" Darius smiles down at his scroll, handing it to Camila, "Here, got it."

"Aww, cariño, you were very cute," She coos, handing it over to Raine who also smiles, although they don't say anything. They hand it to Eda, who takes it, looking down at a picture of kid Hunter, standing there smiling from ear to ear, no shirt on. He's wearing baggy gray shorts and has Direwolf markings painted on his face. He's also holding a wooden club far too big for him, and his hair is tied up in a small silly ponytail on the top of his head.

"Awww, kid, you were adorable," She ruffles his hair, Hunter trying to look up at her annoyed but he's clearly smiling, "And your little club, ugh, you were cute. Do you have more of these, Darius?"

"A whole album full, the kid loved pictures," Darius jokes, Eda immediately swiping out of the picture displayed and scrolling through the album he's already in, "Hey, I didn't say you could do that!"

"Well I'm doing it now," Eda scrolls through, a video catching her eye. She clicks on it, watching as a younger Hunter runs around somewhere.

" Little Prince, get back here! " Darius in the video yells, "How did you get that!"

"I'm taking a video!" Little Hunter calls back, "Catch me! I'm escaping!"

"Little prince, I'm not chasing you!" Darius yells at him, real-life Darius groaning.

"No, you can't watch-"

"Shh! I'm watching," Eda quiets him, tuning back into the video.

"-I'm not giving it back! I'm playing with it, you have to come and get me!" Younger Hunter tells Darius in the video, "You-"

There's the sound of Hunter running right into something before the camera falls, Hunter starting to loudly cry. Darius' voice immediately gets closer, surprisingly sweetly cooing, "Hey, it's alright, little prince, you just hit your head."

"Ow! Ow Darius!" Hunter cries, the camera being picked back up again, although all Eda can see are random, blurry images of something. "Tell Uncle to take away the wall! I don't want it there anymore!" Hunter's high-pitched voice whines, Eda chuckling.

"Alright, calm down, can I have this back?"

"No! It's mine!" The camera moves very fast.

"Hunter-" Darius tries to calmly say, but the camera just moves again, Hunter crying even louder, "Ok, ok, you can have it, just calm down, it's ok."

"Awww," Eda hums, stopping the video and sliding Darius' scroll across the table, "What a good caretaker you are."

"Oh be quiet, Owl Lady," Darius grumbles, Eda looking over at Hunter.

"And what an adorable kid you were," She nudges Hunter, who covers his face again.

"I was not cute or adorable or anything!" He denies.

"You absolutely were," She counters, yawning and looking back out at the table, "But it's getting late and I'm gonna be honest, I'm exhausted."

"Yeah, it's been a long day, thank you guys for talking," Darius tells everyone, getting up, "And it was nice to chat again, I feel like we all needed it."

"Definitely," Eda agrees, patting Hunter on the shoulder, "Alright come on, now it's way past your bedtime kiddo."

"I don't have a bedtime," He complains, him and Raine getting up, along with everyone else. Raine heads up the stairs first, followed by Hunter. Eda bids her goodnights to Alador, Lilith, Camila, and Darius before heading back up the stairs after Raine and Hunter. She finds them already in their bedroom, Hunter sitting on his bed and Raine taking off their glasses. Both of them look up when Eda walks in.

"Alright, bedtime in a minute, just let me brush my teeth first," She tells them, walking out into the hallway, waving at Camila as Eda walks into the bathroom. She barely puts the toothbrush in her mouth before Raine walks in, Eda looking over at them confused. They just walk up behind her and wrap their arms around her waist, Eda just smiling as she continues brushing her teeth. Raine gets progressively closer as she does, burying their face into her shoulder, and when Eda finishes she looks back at them, quietly chuckling and saying, "What's up, Rainestorm?"

"Mmm," They hum, Eda now starting to be actually concerned that they didn't reply. They've been off all day, and she's worried they're actually upset about something and this isn't just them trying to be clingy for no reason.

"Really, are you ok? Is something wrong?" She asks, Raine stepping back.

"Yeah, yeah, everything is fine," They assure her, pausing and leaning against the counter before quietly asking her, "Have you really had that many partners?"

"Mhm, yeah," She affirms, a little nervous about where this conversation is going.

"Why?" They question, "Why did you have so many? How do you even fall in love with that many people?"

"Eh, I never 'fell in love', that's a strong word" She shrugs, unscrewing her fang before continuing, "I did it for different reasons, different people come into your life for different reasons, you know? Sometimes it's just not to be alone for a night or a week or a month, and sometimes it's to come back from something that didn't work out, and sometimes it is to try and look for real, long-term 'falling in love'. But I gave up dating for love a long time ago, stuff never lasted long enough to make the heartbreak worth it."

Raine hums awkwardly before shaking their head, "I don't get that, I have to know someone first."

"And that works too," She smiles at them, a beat of silence going by before Raine continues.

"But nothing worked?"

"Mhm, yeah, nothing," She shrugs, "It's ok, sometimes it wasn't meant to work and that's ok, but most of the time it's because they just didn't like me. I'm too much or too little or too loud or too troubled, you know, the whole shebang. Most people don't want me once they actually get to know me, you know? The legend wears off after a while."

"Mmm," They hum, Eda noticing how off they look. She doesn't comment on it, though, knowing that it's probably not hard for them to figure out that most of her insecurities come from when they dated as kids. She didn't mean to make them feel bad, she was just talking, so she tries to just push the conversation.

"What about you?" She asks, "Really never dated anyone after everything?"

"No," They shake their head, "I just don't really want that, I guess."

Eda freezes, suddenly struck with a shockwave of anxiety. She's not sure exactly what they meant, but it sounded a whole lot to her like they don't want a relationship. It hurts a lot because that means they have no plans on getting back together with her, and they weren't jealous downstairs, they were just uncomfortable because they don't want her like that. She tries to shake it off, though, just looking back forward and putting her fang in its box, along with her earrings. There's a tense minute of silence before Raine nervously asks.



“So, Alador and Darius, how long have they officially been together?”

Eda shrugs, not looking over and replying, “A month or so, Darius told me.”

“Mmm, good for them. I’m glad they’re together again, they deserve it after everything that happened in school. It took a while but it happened, that’s what’s important, right?” Raine says, Eda just humming. It falls quiet again, no one breaking the silence this time. Eda just feels so uncomfortable, she doesn’t understand anything. They’re so touchy with her, they do so much for her, and they seem to care a lot about her and how she’s been and her dating history, why don’t they want a relationship? She’s just so confused.

She’s done her whole night routine, the only thing left is her hair. As much as she would love it to be braided, she doesn’t want to indulge in that with Raine tonight, instead just handing them the hair tie and asking, “Can you just put it up?”

“I can braid it,” They jump to offer, Eda shaking her head.

“No, not tonight,” She shakes her head, their face falling as they just take it and nod, standing behind her and pulling their hair back. They run their hands through her hair slowly, although she doesn’t lean in at all. She doesn’t want to, and it must be obvious because they don’t do it long, moving to just tie up her hair.

“There,” They step back when they’re done.

“Thanks,” She says, looking over when something moves into the doorway, Eda seeing Hunter standing there, Flapjack in his hands.

“Sorry,” He immediately apologizes, “I just didn’t know where you went, I’m sorry.”

“It’s ok, kid, sorry, we took a while. It’s late, come on,” She encourages, walking up to him. She glances back at Raine but doesn’t stop, continuing following after Hunter. They go back into her bedroom, Hunter walking over and climbing into his bed, which is positioned to the right of the big window in her room. It’s far enough that he gets space from Eda and Raine, but close enough that they can hear him if something happens. He also doesn’t have his back to the door, which she doesn’t think he’d like. Eda goes over there too, sitting down on the bed in front of him, saying, “Alright, if anything starts bothering you tonight you wake one of us up, got it?”

Hunter nods, “Mhm, I will.”

“And if you are waking me up you’re gonna have to shake me a concerning amount and that is also ok, right?” She tells him, Hunter chuckling.

“Mhm, ok,” He affirms.

“Great,” She ruffles his hair, “Goodnight, kid. It’s been a long day, try to get some sleep.”

"I will, thank you," He nods, "And uh, goodnight- too."

She smiles at him and gets up, seeing Raine standing a couple of steps from the foot of Hunter's bed, both of them walking back over to their bed. Eda doesn't say anything as she gets into bed, Raine rolling over to be closer to her but Eda not moving. They nudge her hand with theirs, Eda letting them take it. It makes her feel so weird, so content yet so uncomfortable, where this is everything that she wants but she just can't take it knowing it means nothing to them. She falls asleep thinking about it, sure she's going to have a horribly restless night. At least she got a half-decent night out of the revelation, and she knows things were too good to be true. It happens, and just like all her relationships, this will fade with time.

Hopefully, it doesn't take 20 more years.

Notes:

m is for miscommunication...